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# Digging for sanctuary: The garden as a contact sphere

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## Abstract

The European ideal of connectivity across national borders is haunted by a dissolving of boundaries and categories. Public crises are carried into private spaces, generating an almost omnipresent anxiety exacerbated by various media. Almost omnipresent? Yes: for one space, the garden, tenaciously resists the maelstrom of late modernity, or appears to do so in reassuring ways. This article analyses how the multiple European crises are addressed in and by recent mediatizations of gardening. Drawing on selected Anglophone gardening programmes, I argue that the mediascape of gardening represents a relational ‘contact sphere’ where Otherness is negotiated. Focusing on regaining a sense of control and autarky, infotainment programmes on gardening have grown into interactive platforms which disseminate images and practices which contribute to a sustainable vision of Europe, while addressing seemingly uncontrollable problems of change, identity and emotion, threats to human health, and non-transparent food production.

## Keywords

crisis anxiety, garden, gardening programmes, media, sustainability

## Introduction: crises of newness and continuity

The key figure of Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* was an immigrant tumbling from the sky into a transcultural Britain and into a narrative in pursuit of the question: ‘How does newness come into the world?’ Back then, the answer lay in an invitation to embrace the creative challenges of the cultural hybridity and metamorphosis brought on by mass migration. Thirty years later, as the belief in a shared sustainable European vision is eroding, this question and its underlying assumptions need to be rephrased: ‘What happens when newness *stays* in the world?’, we might ask; perhaps even: ‘How does newness keep calm and carry on?’ According to Rushdie’s recent *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015), writing

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back to *One Thousand and One Nights*, the key figure to illustrate contemporary crises is a gardener who becomes unmoored from the earth and begins to float above the ground. This figure of dislocation is framed by a general pandemonium that sees the boundaries between fairy tales and present-day reality dissolve and ancient threats re-emerge.

This chaotic scenario seems eerily familiar in present-day Europe, where all manner of evil genies are cracking open the magic lamps that used to contain them. Recent outbreaks of populist nationalism and other regressive instances of political and practical atavism show a dislocating gap between knowledge of democracy on the one hand and the quotidian experience and expectation horizons of large parts of the *demos* on the other. The gaping abyss of communication and the atrophy of the democratic muscle suggest the need not just for new tools, new discourses, new strategies, new visions and concepts, or other such 'lamps', but also for a material practice that embraces and reinvigorates existing frameworks in a hands-on redefinition and rehabilitation of where we are. It is an interdisciplinary, transcultural and multimedia endeavour that redirects ideas of growth in many arenas and activities. In what follows, I focus on gardening and suggest how acts of digging and their mediatization can contribute to this process.

Newness, the motor of modernity, and sustainability do not obviously make a harmonious pair. This is felt nowhere as clearly as across the continent which derives its core mentality from the modern project. The former near-utopia of a heterogeneous yet united Europe is searching for 'new' narratives to revive and stabilize something no longer quite new and increasingly experienced as a bureaucratic colossus. This comes on top of other anxiety-inducing factors associated with late modernity: scarred by the 2008 economic crisis, many social, political, environmental and cultural sectors seem to be on the brink of dissolution, if not regression. These unfolding crises are virtually inescapable, as the media carry a relentless stream of increasingly brutalized public and critical voices into all areas of life, erasing structures and boundaries between public and private spheres. It takes less time for problems to manifest themselves as threats than for solutions to percolate through the filters of bureaucracy. While the grand crises of European 'anxiety culture'<sup>1</sup> are primarily enacted in public spheres, their impact is largely felt because of the way in which they mesh with private lifeworlds.<sup>2</sup> It stands to reason to look for any possible solutions in this nexus, too.<sup>3</sup>

This essay is concerned with one such site which has the potential to mediate between the public scene of crisis and the private sphere of individual responses: the garden. Gardens have long been associated with recreation and positive visions. Engaging mental, physical and emotional faculties, gardens are spaces which link culture, politics, health science, culinary arts and many other disciplines, interests and activities: to plant a tree is both a concrete step towards improving the environment and a symbolic act of hope. Garden narratives revolve around images signalling shared growth in ways which supersede capitalist greed. In stories ranging from children's books to political allegory, the garden is confirmed as a mythical counter-site to anxiety.<sup>4</sup> The garden fills a material gap in current searches for sustainable imaginaries of Europe: it provides a field of engagement which is democratic, diverse and sustainable, as sociologist Adrian Franklin suggests:

Gardens are an apt nature for modernity, combining as they do the processes of globalization and the technologies whereby we have learnt to manipulate and change or hybridize nature. Gardens and gardening illustrate perfectly the hybrid nature of our relations with the natural world. (Franklin, 2002: 16)

In a more quixotic vein, one might even compare the garden to the European idea(l) of reconciling individual and collective interests in a mutually beneficial framework. Gardens symbolically reflect and practically enact a similar project: in the garden, live beings with different needs and living conditions coexist and are cared for in a space which is both open and enclosed. Like Europe, the garden requires inter- and transdisciplinary perspectives in order to make informed connections between several spatial and historical contexts.

Beyond such ludic analogies, however, productive connections between cultural readings of the garden as a theme or idea and the study of day-to-day gardening practices are still underdeveloped. Disciplines as diverse as horticulture, botany, architecture, history, art, philosophy, sociology and cultural studies may converge on the garden, but they do so with such different agendas that no genuine cross-fertilization takes place. To fully appreciate the power of the garden in European crises such compartmentalization must be rejected in favour of a transdisciplinary perspective. In this essay I explore ways of writing gardens into mediated culture. Drawing on contemporary gardening programmes in a range of media (books, journals, radio, Netflix and YouTube), I approach gardens as spaces of a material and discursive renewal of relationships, on planes that are not only interpersonal, but which also connect human lives and the environment. Informed by new materialism, postcolonial studies and current transformations of the public sphere, in what follows I present a framework for reconceptualizing the garden as an interactive, transformative ‘contact sphere’ which bridges the domestic and the public arenas. Foregrounding refugees, austerity and sustainability, I probe three cases which sketch the garden’s potential to conceptually, as well as practically, contribute to an affirmative praxis for tackling crisis anxiety.

## **Relationality and the contact sphere**

First of all, gardens are relatable. Regardless of someone’s background or the presence or absence of a green thumb, to people across the globe the garden is a familiar referent, and one which seems reassuringly harmless and recreational – at least at first glance. On closer inspection, multiply layered exchanges are found to converge on this space. At its most basic, the garden offers a meeting ground for human and non-human beings, from plants to animals and a myriad of inscrutable micro-organisms. On a conceptual level, the garden stages an intersection between science and myth, nature and culture, or art, public and private, imagination and material, local and global, to name just some of many contrasts. Between the kindergarten and gardening as a hobby for the elderly, gardens promise a safe way of integrating tensions between past and future, roots and routes.

In discourses including sociology, psychology, literary criticism and postcolonial theory, a number of critics have begun to use the notion of relationality to conceptualize a social connectivity which encompasses interdependence and self-reflexivity in a framework which

reaches beyond older models of bounded human identity and selfhood (Donati and Archer, 2015; Eakin, 1988; Gergen, 2009). Relationality encompasses a perspective which foregrounds interdependent, collaboratively constituted aspects of human lives, and contests the sovereignty of a hermetic monolithic Self.<sup>5</sup> While probing plural notions of identity, for instance in sociology or life writing studies, relationality is, so far, more of a mind-set than an applicable theory. However, since it advocates an openness towards otherness and acknowledges the importance of interdependency, it helps work towards minimizing the fear of being changed beyond recognition by an encounter with others. My concept of the contact sphere as outlined below attempts to move relationality towards more concrete questions and practices. In the fields of ecology and ecocriticism, and recently also within narratology, relationality extends beyond the human social sphere and takes into consideration the non-human environment which Western culture long ago relegated to a mere background setting or motif. Here the garden presents itself as a living space where non-human matter is seen to assume a degree of transformative agency – and where an unfashionable degree of optimism in the face of current crises may be cultivated.

Throughout garden narratives, these encounters typically lead to a paradigm shift where the perception of the garden and the gardening self are changed. From Karel Čapek's 1929 classic *The Gardener's Year* (2002) to Michael Pollan's more recent forays into green realms (Pollan, 1996a, 1996b, 2001, 2013), gardeners often set off to transform 'their' gardens, only to find their sovereignty challenged as terrain, plants and pests conspire to teach them that 'nature' has a mind of its own and will not submit meekly to human ministrations. The living space of the garden trains human beings to observe, to think differently, to adjust to time schemes, sizes or scales other than their own, and to consider needs which must be decoded. In short, gardens confront human beings with a form of otherness beyond the human social sphere, which introduces a rethinking of the fabric of power and place and which appeals to both reasoning faculties and affective ones (Harrison, 2008; Hall, 2011).

In an attempt to unpack the potentialities of this encounter I turn to the field of postcolonial studies, where phenomena such as alterity and othering processes have been studied extensively and ongoing negotiations of cultural boundaries have been pioneered. My title concept of the 'contact sphere' is inspired by Marie Louise Pratt's evocative 'contact zone'. Pratt coined the term to problematize negotiations of cultural diversity, power imbalance and communicative challenges between the colonizer and the colonized in the context of travel writing tracing colonial encounters between Europe and Latin America. Contact zones are defined as 'colonial frontiers' (Pratt, 2008: 8), scenes of crisis 'where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today' (Pratt, 2008: 8).

Contact occurs across an unequal terrain of privilege and involves complex negotiations of difference. More elusively, contact as experience in the garden extends beyond social space. This requires tracing an analogy between the trauma of colonial suppression and slavery, on the one hand, and the manipulation, transportation and hybridization of plant lives, on the other. This comparison is not intended to diminish the human suffering and long-term psychological damage engendered by colonialism. That said, the

non-human biosphere, too, has been, and continues to be, subject to exploitation and destruction. In adapting Pratt's notion of contact to spaces which go beyond the social, I acknowledge the environment as a sphere scarred by a similar mind-set. I also map Pratt's process of challenging the underlying assumptions that govern social relations onto relations with the environment. While it may be impossible to extend to these two areas a similar degree of empathy, an appreciation of interdependency is required to work towards grounding environmental perspectives in frameworks of sharing.<sup>6</sup>

Gardening discourse moves contact into a contestation that is even more uneven than that taking place between human beings, quite apart from the fact that linguistic exchanges between human beings and the environment are not possible. Power relations in the nature–human encounter are asymmetrical in the extreme: plants and nature spaces continue to be exploited as resources to empower human lifeworlds. While the looming depletion of these resources gradually engenders a rethinking of behaviours resulting from this assumption, the underlying constellation remains unchanged: human beings cannot communicate with plants, water or the earth. Paradoxically familiar as well as unknown, the environment, a confected portion of which can be accessed through gardening, affects human lives in ways which have yet to be fully understood. Gardens thus pose questions not wholly unlike those raised in Pratt's discussion of transculturation: 'What do people on the receiving end of empire do with metropolitan modes of representation? How do they appropriate them? How do they talk back? What materials can one study to answer those questions?' (Pratt, 2008). While plants do not literally seize language, a closer look at their ways of collaborating reveals more structures which might be labelled intelligent, and even social, than commonly assumed.<sup>7</sup> The model of transculturation developed by Pratt refashions rigid power dichotomies as a negotiation where all parties involved undergo change, directing the analytic lens toward sites of mutual transformation. The current crises dividing Europe indicate that this process continues to pose challenges within the human social sphere. Cultural materialist approaches to culture and the environment, as exemplified by Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), pioneer a rethinking of the apparently rigid separation of living and non-living matter. In the garden, radical otherness is not perceived as threatening, and challenges to understand the other are a matter of playful, recreational creativity, which cries out to be analysed and used more systematically and widely. The contact sphere is informed by the cyclical character of gardening seasons and complements the linear trajectories of modernity with a more meandering, repetitive dynamic. In contrast to the flatness implied by the word 'zone', a sphere emphasizes global connectivity and three-dimensional movement, informed by the semantic vestiges of the politics of the public sphere, as well as shaking up rigid visualizations of hierarchy.

Contact is etymologically associated with touch, and possibly contamination. This is why I have coupled the contact zone with the notion of digging as a metonymic shortcut for evoking the myriad activities gardening comprises. The 'digging' in my title has metaphorical and practical dimensions which support this cyclical trajectory. Digging is both ancient and modern; it implies stable positioning as well as movement. Digging complements the more widely theorized acts of walking which have become symptomatic of the human subject in critiques of modern mobility thanks to, among others, Michel de Certeau's shift from 'structures to actions' (Certeau, 1984: 116). Digging generates a circular trajectory of change, a series of turns. Rather than moving through or away from space, over time,

digging transforms present locations while bringing buried, previously covered material to the surface. In combining change with stability, digging thus offers cognitive as well as affective additions to forward motion. In contrast to the zigzagging movement which locates the ambulator in two planes, the act of digging mobilizes a third dimension; punctuating the medium of the page or the screen, it may even be said to break the fourth wall, as outlined below. Digging means getting one's hands dirty, and while it is a privilege to own a garden, working in it requires the undignified poses caricatured by Karel and Jozef Čapek, and spelled out by Jamaica Kincaid, who describes her gardening self as 'a picture of shame: a woman covered in dirt, smelling of manure, her hair flecked with white dust (powdered lime) . . . and her back crooked with pain from bending over' (Kincaid, 1999: 121). In short, in the hands of the gardener digging is an act of crisis in the manner theorized throughout this volume: it generates productive disturbance in that it changes people's perceptions and evaluations of place and identity and their habitual forms of relating to them. The garden as a contact sphere is thus associated with activities that generate a distinct, material place experience. Digging, representative of these mental and physical undertakings, engenders a change of sensation and gradual insights into the mutual transformation involved in changing a site. While much of this is true for building a house, too, the garden as a living threshold between open and closed domains adds a more acute dimension of time and growth: digging occurs in the service of arranging living matter in such a way as to enable growth and further change over time. Growth and change are experiences which connect the gardener and the living matter with which they garden. While gardening depends on planning and structure, there are necessarily aspects of gardening ventures which lie beyond human control. In the examples discussed below, gardening experience is embedded in acts of social networking. The garden is thus a setting, a medium in its own right and a non-human agent, a collective entity which follows rules and patterns different from human ones. As an arena of intervention located on the margins of present-day crisis anxiety, it represents an aesthetic which is tied to material practices of place and a rethinking of place relations.

## **Digging in the media: narratives of growth, improvement and interaction**

Acts of reading and interpreting gardens seem to call for botanical or horticultural expertise. Acts of reading and interpreting the representation of gardening in the media, on the other hand, require a different, interdisciplinary set of competencies altogether, and it is rare, if ever, that the twain meet. As a result, connections between concrete gardening practices and the metaphorical and mythical discourses of gardens are as yet largely unmapped. Gardening has long been anchored in different media, as Simon Pugh notes: 'Many first encounter a garden through a text: a scholarly or a "coffee table" book, guide, advertising and publicity information sheets' (Pugh, 1988: ix). According to David Hendy (2007: 63), gardening radio programmes such as *Gardeners' Question Time* (1945–present) provide entertainment which attracts a large community not limited to gardening amateurs, which helped the show survive recent budget cuts. Gardening columns are widely if eclectically available in the daily papers, intersecting with urban news culture and subculture;<sup>8</sup> community gardening practices have begun to command attention in sociological and anthropological research (Calvet-Mir and March, 2019; Torres

et al., 2017). Gardens have served as metaphorical space to indirectly tackle political and social questions.<sup>9</sup> Besides disseminating horticultural advice, garden writing has often served as a laboratory for individuals to process private crises.<sup>10</sup> The health benefits of gardening in various kinds of therapy are well documented (Haller and Capra, 2016). All this confirms the (mediated) garden's relational potential to connect individuals with places, their own past, other gardeners and an imagined community – a notional public in the sense theorized by Michael Warner (2002b).

Whereas modernity is near-synonymous with the dynamics of mobility, gardens are near-metonymous with a quality Edward Casey has termed 'emplacement':

A tree stands in its own place . . . It is a life in one place, a life without anxiety. Not only is a tree in its place; it actively contributes to its place, filling it up with its own organic substance. It knows no menacing void . . . A plant, having no place to go, is never lost. (Casey, 1993: xi–xii)<sup>11</sup>

But the antonym of mobility is not stagnation or freedom from change: the tree does grow and change the place around it, and thus heterotopian doubts mingle with reassuring experiences:

When I stand in a garden, I find myself in a scene intermediate between the completely constructed and the frankly wild . . . I have become marginal, half-way between the sacred and the profane, yet I have somehow gained a very special place to be . . . Both gardens and porches are interplaces that allow us to move freely into and out of residences and to vacillate between a private and a public life. (Casey, 1993: 154)

Casey's notion of an 'interplace' underlines the relational property of the garden as a site on the cusp between familiarity and its obverse, where human beings come into contact with lives perceived as Other; in effect, the garden is a relational medium in its own right. Within the garden, human subjects undergo subtle changes of mind and body, such as those described by Casey as well as other, more pleasant and possibly recreational ones (Barrett, 2011; Friedman and Carterette, 1996; Hormuth, 2010).

Garden narratives are both peripheral to most discourses of crisis and persistent in their subtle interventions. As I suggest in my reading of three contemporary garden contact spheres, it is partly due to their peripheral location in terms of cultural discourse as well as crisis anxiety that they break through the surface level of ingrained discursive habits and perspectives. In what follows I trace relational perspectives on the garden as a contact sphere in three garden broadcasts, each of which makes reference to one or several particular aspects of current European crises: migration, austerity and climate change. My choice of corpus is suggested by the key position of gardens and gardening in the collective identity of the British Isles. British gardening broadcasts are a special case compared to their continental counterparts in Germany, the Netherlands or Denmark. Gardening is regarded as an essential aspect of the national self-image and constructions of Englishness from Shakespeare to Kipling have operated on analogies between the insular geography of the British Isles and the enclosed nature of gardens (Burden and Kohl, 2006; Egbert, 2006; Featherstone, 2009; Matless, 1998). In the United Kingdom gardens are very much a part of the social fabric and the



popular entertainment sector. They are prominent status symbols and there is a long-standing tradition of gardens as showpieces used to bridge the domestic and public sectors, as evidenced by national heritage programmes for home owners to open their private gardens for visitors. Public interest in gardening programmes is high, and they serve to elevate domestic gardens into something relevant to a larger commonwealth, with owners and curators imagined as stewards within such structures. Flower shows present social narratives rather than resembling trade fairs, as they do on the continent. Focusing on small-step transformation, gardening infotainment programmes have grown into interactive narrative platforms where change and growth are central. These contribute to a sustainable vision of Europe while addressing a range of topical challenges, including demographic change, multicultural identity, threats to human health and non-transparent modes of food production.

### **The Lemon Tree Trust project: growth in limbo**

Migration is one of the most visible current crises, and media discourse on the topic is dominated by threatening images of a seemingly inexorable influx of refugees claiming entry into Europe, generating feelings of anxiety, helplessness and shame. What is often underrepresented is the plight of refugee camps outside European territory, and given the compassion fatigue elicited by the subject, this is not surprising. In this context the familiar space of the garden offers practical as well as imaginative perspectives which can challenge stereotypes characterizing migrants as 'Others' and generate empathy. To start with the practical aspects, the UNHCR's planning standards for refugee camps stipulate that '15 m<sup>2</sup> per person is allocated to household gardens attached to the family plot which should be included in the site plan from the outset' (UNHCR, 2015). Several aid organizations which complement initiatives, such as Food and Agricultural Organization, the UNHCR's World Food Program, include gardens in the praxis of organized crisis response, among them Justdigg.it.org, the Mercy Hands for Humanitarian Aid collaboration, and the Lemon Tree Trust.

Established in 2015, the Lemon Tree Trust supports Greening Innovation, a gardening initiative in Domiz Camp in northern Iraq that aims to restore dignity, purpose and cultural identity to people who have been uprooted from their homes. The Trust helps bring people together through the provision of seeds and plants, garden competitions and education centres (Lemon Tree Trust, 2019).

Several recent studies have addressed the material, social and psychological dimensions of this and similar community garden projects (Millican et al., 2018; Perkins et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2014). While they make a persuasive case for the multiple benefits of refugee gardening, down to a decrease in violence among camp children, they do not quite seem to know what to do with the fact that the gardens created under duress are not mere kitchen gardens. There is a striking predominance of flowers and ornamental features. Flowers are central to the gardeners' cultural and personal identities, and interviewees speak of the sense of peace they gain from their flowers and stress the sense of dignity and pride they gain from having something to give. In 2018, the Lemon Tree Trust's initiative was represented by a show garden at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show (2018). 'Inspired by the resilience, determination and ingenuity',

and designed by landscape architect Tom Massey ‘with the input of refugees’ (Massey, 2019), the garden reflected stylistic and material gardening practices from Domiz Camp. It was awarded a Royal Horticultural Society Silver-Gilt medal and succeeded in resituating refugee gardening in the Western world, drawing attention to aesthetic and artistic aspects of the refugee experience. Although mediated through the work of an English designer, the contact engendered by way of this initiative goes beyond a mere tokenistic nod towards otherness. There is a more direct commentary from refugee garden makers: on the Lemon Tree Trust website, an interactive page engages viewers in an experience of what this means in concrete terms. In ten short films viewers are offered a look at the competition-winning gardens. Through voiceovers their makers explain what the garden means to the individual or family in question: what made them build it, what they planted, and what the garden reminds them of. Gardener Khaled Ismael declares that in spite of his poverty, gardening puts ‘the world in my hand’ (Lemon Tree Trust, 2017a). Among the motives (Scrollytelling, 2018) the gardeners list a desire for beauty, a way to combat the dust of the camp, an arena for shared activity for what remains of their scattered family, a safe playground for shell-shocked children, a sign of hope, a memory of home, a practical way to upcycle waste, plastic bins and grey water, a much needed source of good cheer in the face of grim prospects as well as depression, an opportunity to use one’s hands and skills, the source of presents to give to others, a refuge of relative calm in a noisy and restless environment, and food and thus ‘life itself’, as Syrian gardener Amal Mourad puts it (Lemon Tree Trust, 2017b).

The videos involve viewers in a tense mixture of movement and stillness: the camera’s potential for movement is deliberately eschewed as it remains fixed for the duration of the 90 seconds each video lasts. The only movement comes from the wind shuffling the leaves, and viewers are left to fill the gap and explore the limited space at their leisure while listening to the Arabic narrative and reading the English subtitles. Following the voiceover, the garden-makers are faded in to appear before their creation, to hold the camera’s gaze for 10 to 15 seconds without speaking or moving. The simple aesthetic is a gripping illustration of how the growing garden intercedes in the enforced impasse experienced by the refugees: the camp is built to be a temporary facility, yet many of its inhabitants, tens of thousands more than were ever meant to be accommodated there, are stuck in limbo for years, unable to put down roots themselves or properly rebuild their lives and careers.

Both the endorsement by the Royal Horticultural Society and the Lemon Tree Trust’s interactive pages, designed by the Dutch makers of the Refugee Republic educational tool (Van Tol et al., 2014), have generated a new level of awareness of the ways refugee creativity can focus around a shared endeavour due to the ways in which the project challenges unquestioned assumptions about refugees as figures of destitution and gardens as icons of privilege. Massey stresses the importance of connecting refugee gardeners to like-minded people across geographical and economic gaps as well as ‘making people think about what refugees are going through’ (Lemon Tree Trust, 2018), while other commentators highlight their satisfaction at connecting with other NGOs. While it is too early, as yet, to assess the long-term outcomes of this garden encounter, the profits from it have already led to follow-up projects in Greece and the opening of a dialogue which sees a sense of crisis supplanted by a discourse of aesthetics and dignity.

## Big dreams, small spaces: austerity, gentrification and community

The power of gardens to make invisible spaces beautiful and noteworthy is at play in many forms of media, and while not all crises are of quite such an existential nature as the ones explored above, niggling concerns about constricted space form part of the everyday world of urban life. Sociological enquiries into urban gardening show that such initiatives are motivated by ‘a combination of individual and collective aspirations’ (Calvet-Mir and March, 2019: 98) but their grip on the public imagination and their affective powers are as yet unmapped.

*Big Dreams, Small Spaces* (2014–17) spins a double makeover narrative. Produced by the BBC, the show has been picked up by Netflix across Europe, implying a wider-ranging relevance. In each of the episodes, renowned TV gardener Monty Don travels across the UK to advise selected garden owners in two locations on how to make the most of their property, inspiring viewers in the process. The subjects of instruction, representative of a diverse model demographic, draw up plans of their dream garden, identifying goals and challenges. These are inevitably environmental in nature as well as personal or social: the garden might need to become safe for people with special needs, bring together a disjointed community, commemorate a deceased loved one and comfort the bereaved, or mark the occasion of a wedding, and often may need to bridge the different ambitions of the individuals concerned. The problems named address crises of European life familiar to an imagined community of viewers that extends beyond the British Isles: spatial and budgetary constraints; unreliable builders; alienation and helplessness in the face of a nearly incomprehensible, automated world; health threats; overwork; the list goes on. The ‘smallness’ of the title relates to one of the most acutely felt aspects of austerity – restricted space. The gardens on the show start out as particularly ugly ducklings which seem a far quack from satisfaction of any sort. What stands in the way of dreams, the show reinforces, is not size or wealth but knowing what to do with limited funds and resources, or, at minimum, knowing where to start. Growth itself is natural and will occur; the mythic comforts of a bespoke pastoral space becomes available. The show thus confirms the garden as a ‘private space with a public face’, facilitated by the media personage of Montague Don, OBE. Repetitively hailed as ‘the nation’s favourite gardener’, the presenter lends celebrity dazzle to the mud-fest most episodes are made up of. In a mediascape where politicians have been known to deride expertise and academic credentials, experts who confidently predict the outcome of processes based on past research which viewers cannot directly access are often figures of resentment. Within the frame of the makeover narrative, this is reversed, turning private spheres into public classrooms: Monty Don functions as an arbiter, whose visits to the episode’s gardens punctuate the plot, and who sets deadlines, prescribes steps and occasionally administers stern words. Within the utopian framework of the improvement narrative, the garden is cast as a mythical sphere inhabited by a reassuringly infallible *deus ex machina*: ‘Monty Don is digging in my garden!’ This exclamation from a star-struck hobby gardener is as programmatic an indication as any of how this gardening show uses a celebrity dynamic to lend glamour to digging through dirt as a cathartic exercise.

The show expands the image of the garden as a quintessentially national treasure. After all, many plants derive from abroad, as Monty explains, and learning about their needs and their expansive, international and transcultural nature or 'behaviour' is key to the transformations at hand. Boundaries are literally broken as garden owners knock down walls or add connective water features. The garden renders differences of nationality, ethnicity, habit, generation, economics and class if not void at least less off-putting, inducing each participant in a shared project to discover more about themselves and better realize their full potential. This is especially visible in the case of Zimbabwe-born Alethea who turns her front garden into a communal vegetable-picking spot and encourages her reserved neighbours to accept a form of gardening with which they are not familiar. In Oxford, two neighbours collaborate to combine their front gardens into one. At the upper end of the price range, various hopefuls put together Mediterranean gardens that take Italian vines, Spanish olive trees and Portuguese architecture to the UK, combining continental influences with native specimens. Normality in the age of precariousness can take many shapes, and gardeners can make do with a budget as modest as £150 providing they enlist helpers, and the evolving gardens become centres where gardeners and their social circles meet.

As a relational contact sphere, this stylized programme has its limitations: makeover programmes establish a temporary utopia of wish-fulfilment, and this show is no exception. From its idealized demographic – harmoniously mingling migrants, queer couples, single parents and people with chronic health issues – to the scripted plot, this is an artifice. Despite the refrain of smallness reiterated throughout, to own a garden, however cramped, is a privilege, so the rock bottom of true austerity is nowhere in sight.<sup>12</sup> However, the motivation and the emotions experienced, not forgetting the gardening advice, are solid and real, and this defines the garden as a heterotopian gateway between theory and practice. In contrast to older shows such as *Love Your Garden*, where instant dreams are confected in the space of a single day to reward deserving members of society (who have been lured away for the duration of the makeover), here garden owners are the hands-on makers of their own fortune. Digging is taken literally, and it takes the shape of a treasure hunt, as well as bringing up buried problems: the dreamers come face to face with their fears, unresolved conflicts, harmful habits and other obstacles to success. Each of the episodes becomes a little *Bildungsroman*, an idealizing story of trial and error, resistance and a finding of one's individual taste and vision. As the gardens develop, the gardeners, too, are transformed: their ideas, feelings and social relations are changed. Insights about motivation, structure, sheer hard work, budgeting and time frames all sharpen. The gardens they end up with, at least for as long as the camera stays to watch, thus become monuments to mark life lessons learnt, including the reassuring success which can emerge in the face of chaos. Most of all, the gardens become portraits representative of their maker(s) and a move from a focus on smallness to one on big dreams.

This process of discovery is less a new narrative than one which never grows old. The 'moral of the tale' is modern as well as reassuringly conservative: there is a continued need for raw manpower and for one-to-one communication between actual people. It is also overwhelmingly optimistic, promising access to a time-honoured curative idyll. The contact sphere of the garden connects the material reality of the viewers' domestic scenes with an imagined community that is perceived as global and

focused on growth and improvement, with a past from which useful lessons can be derived and a future over which they exert a level of control. The key development in these narratives is emotional as well as cognitive. From austerity shame, garden owners are led to develop pride in their gardens, their achievements and their growing relationship with the environment.

### **HuwsNursery: growing sustainable food**

The last contact sphere to be examined exemplifies a big gardening dream made true with the aid of various forms of media, and it revolves around the unusual phenomenon of a gardening prodigy.<sup>13</sup> *HuwsNursery*, run by Huw Richards, is a YouTube channel offering instruction on how to grow organic food on a shoestring. True to its tagline – ‘Don’t Panic, Grow Organic!’ – this channel explicitly addresses its audience’s crisis awareness and locates the solution in sustainability and health. In his welcome video, Richards promises his followers that they will belong to ‘a minority who know where their food is coming from’ (Richards, 2015). His bid to invigorate the staid middle-aged occupation of gardening with internet stardom has been a success: featured in several newspapers, the well-researched videos have attracted over 116,000 subscribers of all ages across Europe and around the Commonwealth. They also earned Richards several entrepreneurial prizes before he finished his A-levels.

Like *Big Dreams*, *HuwsNursery* helps viewers overcome such obstacles as lack of space and funding. One need not even own a garden for the digging to work. Food may be grown on balconies, windowsills and patios. Waste tins, old gutters, plastic bottles, leaky rain barrels, dried-up Christmas trees and toilet paper rolls can be upcycled into inexpensive gardening equipment. Both shows combat their viewers’ sense of helplessness in the face of the grand societal crises of the moment and enhance their audiences’ abilities to cope through gardening, developing in the process a sense of pride and achievement. Whereas *Big Dreams* focuses on how to make an aesthetic out of limitation, *HuwsNursery* foregrounds gardening’s transformative power with regard to the human body, promoting better health. Since his early days of wobbly camera-phone voiceovers, Richards has professionalized his craft in a bid to appeal to a younger audience, as he outlines in the comments sections of his videos. His titles tap into the click-bait-discourse of fitness tutorials and DIY clips: ‘Creating an Endless Supply of Salad over Summer with Minimal Effort’ encourages newcomers with an emphasis on simplicity and quick results; several other videos are addressed to ‘lazy gardeners’ or frame their contents as ‘hacks’ (Richards, 2015).

Richards’ videos explicitly address themselves to an imagined community and thereby to the relational potential of gardening. Viewers are encouraged to share cuttings and tubers, swap perennials and cultivate growers’ networks, and *HuwsNursery* regularly draws attention to fellow channels in need of subscribers. Almost every video makes mention of the abundance of food grown and aims to enhance the numbers of growers: inter-human competition is not the point; tricking small spaces into yielding maximum outcome is the real challenge.

Throughout the videos an exploratory aesthetic frames digging as a treasure hunt: Richards’ voiceover is accompanied by magnified shots of his hands raking through soil and lifting rhizomes as he explains details about the quality of compost or mulch.

The act of digging, especially when performed by a spade, constitutes a moment of revelation, a breaking through the looking glass. ‘I really don’t know what to expect’, Richards tells viewers when digging in search of Jerusalem artichokes, after voicing apprehension about how they might have weathered the drought, only to come away with a satisfactory quarry.

By promising sustainable and affordable home-grown food, *HuwsNursery* goes to the root of many current crises. Connecting the private sphere of the human body and the big picture of national and global affairs, Richards’ videos bring these issues close to home. On a video posted on 14 September 2018, for instance, he takes stock of his produce after an exceptionally dry summer, making a direct link between climate change and the personal private sphere:

this year has been a year of learning lessons, and also somewhat feeling a bit vulnerable because we are so not used to these massive changes in the climate and the weather. We thought, hang on a minute, we might not be as resilient as we thought we were, especially when it comes to water. (Richards, 2018)

Panning between Huw’s face and close-ups of his hands applying protective mulch to a salad plant, the camera provides a counter-narrative to these worries, and Huw proceeds to talk about a project that works water limitation into the calculations for providing food as the camera sweeps across a garden where vegetables are plentiful despite the drought. The video concludes with concrete steps which can be taken to help the plants, and, by extension, to achieve greater wellbeing. Life may be overwhelming, but home-grown tomatoes are within reach, and to cultivate and ingest them constitutes a small-scale achievement which contributes to a sense of control. Vegetables and human gardeners are connected, and observing what goes on in the garden and learning how to cope with global warming in one’s own backyard is key to a sense of control. In this and similar clips, current troubles and the prospects of a problematic future are addressed, but they are transformed into gardening challenges. The focus remains on the goal of providing home-grown food and on viewing one’s direct environment as a space of learning and discovery.

## Conclusion

In its 2013–14 project, ‘A New Narrative for Europe’, the European Union explicitly calls for narrative solutions to mobilize a social imaginary needed to invest Europe with new life and sustainable prospects. Place relations and a sustainable environmental practice constitute central aspects of this creative challenge:

Europe needs a societal paradigm shift – in fact, nothing short of a ‘New Renaissance’. The term invokes the memory of the revolutions in thought that were sparked in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This was a time when society, art and science shook the established order and laid the groundwork for the current age of the Knowledge Society. Europe has the resources to be at the forefront of this age. It also needs to be positioned as the world champion of sustainable living and to be a driving and inspirational force both in setting and implementing a global agenda for sustainable development. This must be achieved by caring not only for biodiversity but also for cultural diversity and pluralism. (European Commission, 2014)

While I applaud the initiative, I would like to suggest that we need to go beyond narrative in order to overcome the contemporary discursive schism that sees words and narrative juxtaposed with actual lifeworlds and quotidian practices in defining and shaping the environment.

Comparing various present-day crises in three cases of mediatized gardening, this paper has identified patterns of how gardens can help to overcome the sense of helplessness and disconnect associated with a globalized present. I have suggested that gardening and garden mediatizations can contribute new perspectives on contemporary crises and the crisis anxiety characteristic of the present, suggesting ways of developing practical habits that redefine place and relations to the environment. I have also experimented with thinking beyond the discursive realm suggested by the narrative framework in a bid to connect narrative with material practices. Acts of gardening depicted in the media offer the potential to be contact spheres that connect people with each other and with a sense of place as well as the agency to affect their direct surroundings. Acts of digging symbolize and exemplify a way of redefining and simplifying how individuals perceive and handle their place in the world. The mediatization of these activities creates a sense of shared purpose, an imagined community which revolves around a commitment to learn, to embrace change and to rethink activities associated with traditional craft as part of a global present.

It might seem counter-intuitive, given the current accumulation of crises in the social and political spheres, to add to these by complementing them with environmental challenges. But as the examples analysed above have shown, the potential of gardening to renew place experience, self-experience and social relations may be worth investing in. The contact sphere of mediatized gardening shows how necessity is the mother of invention, and in this sense, crisis itself can be said to act like a contact sphere in its own right.

Conceptualizing crisis as a moment of contact, I would also suggest rethinking (or scarifying) the underlying assumptions of newness that power the European Union's call for narratives. In his poem 'Digging', Irish poet Seamus Heaney (1969) juxtaposes the act of digging with the act of writing, represented by the lyrical 'I' and his father, whose vigorous literal ground-breaking with the aid of a spade captures tradition, a lost art and attitude to the world. Digging with a spade, looked at from above, from the position of the lyrical 'I' at his desk where he digs away with his pen, is hard, unfashionable and associated with internal rather than outwardly visible forms of dignity and pride. Mediatized digging and mediatized gardens can act as laboratories where these distinct spheres collide and creatively interact. In this sense, digging as a relational practice can reinvigorate sites we inhabit and shape in ways which combine the old and the new, honing a sense of local knowledge and building experiences of the environment as a living threshold, where dislocated gardeners can touch base.

## Notes

1. For a further outline of anxiety culture, see Shea and Kattan (2018).
2. In what follows I will use Jürgen Habermas's term 'lifeworld' as a shortcut to refer to the entangled dynamics of conceptualizing modern lives. A more detailed explanation of the term is offered by Fairtlough (1991).

3. I use the term in a narrower sense than originally theorized by Jürgen Habermas, to cover ‘public discourse’, the media, and places of debate, as suggested by Fraser (1990). My use corresponds to ‘public’ as outlined by Warner (2002b).
4. Examples of prominent children’s books include Burnett (1998 [1911]), Pearce (1976) and Jekyll (1982). Political allegories exemplifying this include Warner (2002a), Kosinski (1970) and Coetzee (2004 [1974]).
5. Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret S. Archer (2015) explicitly outline the implications of this questioning of individuality in the context of European social and political theory.
6. Plants as ‘green gold’ have served as motivating factors in colonial subjugation (Didur, 2011; Grove, 1995; Roos and Hunt, 2010; Schiebinger, 2004). Effective literary indictments of such practices can be found in the poetry of Olive Senior and other Caribbean writers such as Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid and Jean Rhys (Hoving, 2005; Tiffin, 1998, 2005, 2007).
7. Popularized by TED talks, research by scientists such as Stefano Mancuso (2010), Suzanne Simard (2016) and Greg Gage (2017) has done much to make such ideas more widespread.
8. Examples include Charles Dudley Warner’s 1870 book *My Summer in a Garden* (2002a) and Vita Sackville-West’s 1930s–1950s columns in *The Observer*, *The New Statesman* and others. The chapters making up Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Garden (Book)* (1999) first saw the light of day in *The New Yorker* in the 1990s.
9. Warner’s book *My Summer in a Garden* (2002a) exemplifies this, as do novels such as *Being There* (Kosinski, 1970; Silko, 2005 [1999]), or in a lighter vein, films such as *Greenfingers* (Hershman, 2000). Kenneth Helphand (2006) and George McKay (2011) attest to the garden’s potential as a space of activism and resistance.
10. Elizabeth von Arnim (1985 [1898]) ‘garden-writes’ her way out of an unhappy marriage; Elizabeth Smart (1987) does the same to escape a doomed love affair. Kate Llewellyn (1987) reconciles herself with the process of aging in and through gardening. Gertrude Jekyll (1937) turns gardener when poor eyesight prevents her from pursuing a painter’s vocation and paints instead with plants; Marion Cran (1917) copes with the Great War by cleaning up Europe from her garden outwards; and Beverley Nichols (1983) cultivates his written gardens into playful closets where social diversity bloomed in a climate that criminalized homosexuality. Film-maker Derek Jarman (2009) builds and stages his shingle garden in concerted acts of protest against the public demonization of AIDS in the 1980s and 90s, and Richard Mabey processes a nervous breakdown through landscape in *Nature Cure* (2011).
11. Whether or not trees are free of anxiety has since come into doubt, as recent research into plant communication suggests (see Wohlleben, 2017).
12. Don attempted to cover how gardens could aid people in difficult circumstances in his doomed and now-discontinued attempt to aid drug rehabilitation by way of gardening initiatives, televised as *Growing Out of Trouble* (2005). At the other end of the spectrum, Don’s many gardening programmes shot in glamorous locations across the world contribute to an impression of exclusiveness, under titles such as *Paradise Gardens* (2018) or *The Gourmet Garden* (2013).
13. Alongside making strategic use of the crowd-funding platform Patreon (Richards, 2016), Richards has a strong presence on Twitter, Wordpress and Facebook, and his enterprise has been featured in several newspaper articles (Moss, 2018; Miller, 2017; Hayward, 2016).

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